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**VARGA ISTVÁN:**

**„*MINTHA TÖBB OLDALRÓL KAPNÁM A FÉNYT...*”**

**[AS IF I GOT THE LIGHT FROM SEVERAL SIDES]**

**THE PROSE WRITER GYULA TAKÁTS**

BUDAPEST, 2009.



## The objectives of the dissertation

This paper aims to draw attention to and raise awareness of Gyula Takáts's prose writing. In addition to Sándor Weöres, Zoltán Jékely, György Rónay, Tamás Kiss, Géza Képes, István Vas and Zoltán Zelk, who belong to the third generation of the literary journal *Nyugat* [The West], he is also one of the outstanding figures in this generation, even if the extensive Gyula Takács reception focuses mostly on his lyrical work and considers his prose as some by-product of his poetry.

In spite of the fact that he was going to be a painter (he showed his first drawings to József Rippl-Rónai), Takáts started his literary career with books of poetry. Yet, his doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup> written in 1934 had already indicated (also because of dealing with ethnology) that he had an affinity for prose. His manual skills as well as his artistic talents to capture objects and landscapes had been active since the start of his career and it was merely a matter of time during the completion of his oeuvre when he would reveal his accompanying muses, and try himself as a poet, a prose writer, an ethnographer and a graphic artist, or even, all these simultaneously. He dealt with painting a lot, which, as he wrote, „*lírai hajlamommal együtt nőtt, sőt gyerekkorom egyes szakaszaiban a verselés ösztökélő vágya fölé terebélyesedett*” [was growing in me together with my lyrical disposition, and in some stages of my childhood, it even exceeded the impulsive desire to write poetry]. „Some graphic inclination, a kind of impressionistic point of view can be identified in each of his prose writings...”<sup>2</sup>

In my judgement, Takáts's prose not only deserves but also demands a deep analysis. Thus, I have focused on his novels; the object of the analysis were the *Egy flóbertpuska története* [The Story of a Flobert Gun], the *Vitorlás a berken* [Sailor on the Grove], the *Polgárjelöltek* [Townspeople to be], the *Színház az „Ezüst Kancsó”-ban* [Theatre in the „Silver Jug”], the collection of short stories *Kinek könnyebb?* [For Whom is it Easier?], and the essay collection with the title *Egy kertre emlékezve* [Remembering a Garden]. These works were examined thoroughly because, in my view, among Takáts's prose writings they are the milestones that show where his place is among the members of the third generation of the *Nyugat*. Due to lack of space two of his prose collections published recently cannot be discussed here; these are *Emlékek életrajza* [The Biography of Memories] and the diary notes

<sup>1</sup> A *somogyi Nagyberék*. Adatok a somogyi Nagyberék gazdaság- és településföldrajzához. [The Nagyberék –The Great Groves – of Somogy. Economic and Settlement Geographical Data about the Nagyberék in Somogy.] (Doctoral dissertation.) Pécs. 1934. Kultúra Könyvnyomdai Műintézet, 40 p. (Specimina Dissertationum Facultatis Philosophicae Regiae Hungaricae Universitatis Elisabethinae Quinqueecclesiensis, 51 p.)

<sup>2</sup> Laczkó, András: Takáts Gyula. [Gyula Takáts] Bp.: Akadémiai Kiadó 1976. p. 159. [original citation in Hungarian, English translation by the author of the dissertation]

with the title *Öt esztendő Drangalagban* [Five Years in Drangalag], albeit they were edited by the author of this dissertation.<sup>3</sup>

## Method

Sándor Weöres, friend and fellow student of Gyula Takáts, was the first to call the young people clustering around the Nyugat in the middle of the 1930s a generation. Weöres's dissertation, which was written in Pécs with the title *A vers születése* [The Birth of the Poem], is a useful reading, in which he summarised the effects and modes guiding the poet during the subtle process of writing a poem. In this work he writes about poets writing prose:

*„Ha a poéta elkezd prózát írni, eleinte többnyire igen szánalmas az eredménye: a kötöttség egyensúlyozója nélkül gyámoltalan; és a megnyilvánuló hibák jellemzőek a temperamentumára. Némelyek, mikor kitörnek a kötöttség gyámkodása alól, olyanok, mint a gátrepesztő folyó: rendszertelen és bőséges kedélyvilágukat nem fékezi semmi, a próza terjengősen dagadozik, [...] se-vége se-hossza a mondatok áradatának. Mások valósággal fáznak, mikor kibújnak a forma köntöséből: hiányérzéssel küzdenek, a lendítőerő hiányát érzik, minden szavuk kínosan fakad és élettelen és szürke lesz; [...] a mondatok fogaskerekei nem bírnak egymásba-kapaszkodni, a gondolatok összezsúfolódnak és nem találják a folytatásukat. [...] Az első eset inkább az ösztönös, érzelmi-lendületű költőknél, második a tudatos és higgadt vers-ötvösöknél gyakori.”* [If a poet starts to write prose, the result is pathetic at first: he is helpless without the guidance of restrictions; and the appearing mistakes characterise his temperament. Breaking out of restrictions and bindings, some are like a river breaking through the dike; nothing can control their uncoordinated and affluent spirit, the prose becomes lengthy and redundant, [...] the stream of sentences never ends. Others are almost cold when taking off their clothes, the form: they struggle with a sense of lack, they miss the force of impulse and all their words are lifeless and grey, [...] the cogwheels of sentences fail to connect, the ideas get crowded and cannot find their continuation. [...] The former is rather common with emotional poets, while the latter is frequent with conscious and calm ones.] <sup>4</sup>

No doubt, Takáts belongs to Weöres's second category; he is one of the conscious and calm poets who, on the other hand, is also able to meet the expectations of prose. This is due to the fact that Takáts rarely writes prose

<sup>3</sup> Takáts, Gyula: Emlékek életrajza. [The Biography of Memories] Kaposvár, Berzsenyi Kiadó. 2001. ed. Varga, István Takáts, Gyula: Öt esztendő Drangalagban. [Five Years in Drangalag] Pécs, Pannónia Könyvkiadó, 2005. ed. Varga, István

<sup>4</sup> Weöres, Sándor: *A vers születése*. Méditáció és vallomás. [The Birth of the Poem. Meditation and Confession] Dunántúli Pécsi Egyetemi Kiadó, Pécs, 1939.

as a poet; he has the original inclination to write prose. The title of this dissertation was chosen to confirm the idea he expressed when Ervin Lázár was interviewing him in the 1970s: in his work prose played the role „...mintha több oldalról kapnám a fényt...” [as if I got the light from several sides]<sup>5</sup>

*Egy flóbertpuska története.* [*The Story of a Flobert Gun*] Takáts's first youth novel was published in 1967. By then the poet, writer, painter and museum director Takáts had gained five years' life experience as well as an even heavier „experience-package” (expression by József Egrý). He had not entered his period of old age writings yet, still, his novel counts as a summary. The author dedicated this novel of lyrical beauty to his father's memory. Fathers' memories urged the most outstanding figures of his generation, his dearest friends, to write excellent works. Take, for example, Zoltán Jékely's most beautiful poems – his father was a teacher and poet from Nagyenyed, – or Sándor Tatay's father, who was a Calvinist minister in the Bakony. It can be pointed out that all families shared the trauma; from Transylvania, which was disannexed, to Transdanubia, which remained within the borders. Takáts's novel also reveals that the wounds caused by World War I had not been healed in people's souls yet.

The organising element in the novel is a Flobert gun. Its ownership is a goal to be reached for children indulging in day-dreams, wishing to become adults as soon as possible. And rightly so. Should they get it and use it, they could be initiated into real life. According to the beliefs of all tribal peoples, rites of passage include personality transformation during the trials. A new adult personality is born from the old childhood one. Obtaining real weapons, i.e. adult tools, equals to becoming adults. In Takáts's novel the gun is the object described by Searle as follows: „we often develop the need for an instrument enabling us to recognise an object, something that shows status, even if it is invisible in the object itself. For this purpose we apply so called status indicators. The most obvious examples are wedding rings, uniforms, badges, passports, driving licenses”.<sup>6</sup> The gun is such a status indicator in Takáts's novel; the gun, which is not only the symbol of destruction and death but also that of becoming a man. During the search for and the use of the Flobert gun several moments arise when the novelist, (and the narrator Miska Trombitás) suspends and stops time. Then he makes a journey through time, into the past, the way Gyula Krúdy and Marcel Proust have done

<sup>5</sup> Látogatóban. Kortárs magyar írók vallomásai.[On a Visit. Confessions of Contemporary Hungarian Writers.] (ed.: Lengyel, Péter) Bp.: Gondolat Kiadó, 1971. p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> Searle, John R. *Mind, Language and Society*. Vince Kiadó Kft, Bp. 2000. 156. p. Hungarian translation.: Kertész, Balázs [original citation in Hungarian, translated into English by the author of this dissertation]

before. In one scene at the beginning of the novel a story appears in Miska Trombitás's memories, which is about such time relativity on the border between dreams and reality, past and present. Júlia Szilágyi's paper with the title *A felfüggesztett idő nyomában* [Searching for Suspended Time] gives an explanation: "waiting is the interpretation of time. It concerns the time that has not come yet, perhaps it never will. But this does not influence the active or passive strategy of waiting. But what sort of time is the time of waiting? It is certainly known that it is time that is directed at changing. And it results in the way how waiting antropomorphises time in the literary work. The person who is waiting can fear or hope, expect, distress, yield to fate or start planning, imagine and remember. What is this reminiscent of? Life itself, what more, existence, because waiting as a literary state, as a mode of speech is a metaphore of existence."<sup>7</sup>

*Vitorlás a berken* [Sailor on the Groves]. Péter Balassa was the first to observe in Miklós Mészöly's novelette *Megbocsátás*<sup>8</sup> [Forgiveness] that after the first image (the never dispersing train smoke over the town) eight other images appear. Both the reader and the literary historian sense a kind of relationship between the images and presume that the logic of the story is built upon them. Takáts also used this mode of writing in his novels - even preceding Mészöly. In the youth novel *Vitorlás a berken*, for example, he describes an image (a Schooner, a sailing ship), just the way Mészöly does. Takáts paints the colours on the setting of the novel, as if it was a kind of foundation. Peat soil is black. It is a colour, too, because children take it home, dissolve it in jars. Then, on top of the black of the groves Takáts can paint the bluegill's „piros, arany és fekete kopoltyúját” [red, gold and black gill], the colours of the „a halak kolibrijának” [hummingbird of fish].<sup>9</sup> Note that Egyry József, Takáts's friend and master of painting preferred simplifying forms to simple plane shapes like triangles, or three-dimensional shapes like scones. A cubist painting could be assembled from some of Takáts's multitudes of forms. The only difference is that Takáts would not overcolour his own work of art if he was painting an own landscape. The Takáts paintings have a vivid but economical use of colours. On the land of Zrínyi, Takáts paints his epic poem in prose, like a late Baroque mural painter, like Maulbertsch or Dorffmeister. Being a modern colourist, a follower of impressionism, he revives the Christian symbolism, moreover the iconography of mural painters. The novel is set in an era, when the sounds of the church bells in the groves are replaced by the sounds of pump house engines.

<sup>7</sup> Szilágyi, Júlia: *A felfüggesztett idő nyomában* [Searching for Suspended Time] Kellék.1991.6..p.33.

<sup>8</sup> Mészöly, Miklós: *Megbocsátás*. [Forgiveness] Bp. Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1984. p.81.

<sup>9</sup> Takáts, Gyula: *Vitorlás a berken*. [Sailor on the Grove] p. 11–12.

*Polgárjelöltek*. [Townpeople to be] By 1944 Takáts had completed his second work, with the title *Polgárjelöltek*, which is another step forward on the road towards literary masterpieces.

Takáts is a small town person. He is an expert of small town people, of small town relations and connections. It is wise to suspect autobiographical elements behind some momentums. „A biography can be evaluated from the aspect how it sheds light on the actual product of poetry, besides, it can be justified by saying that the genius can be studied in this way, these people's moral, intellectual and emotional development can be observed, and, finally, a biography can be considered to provide observation material for the regular examination of the psychology and the processes of poetry.”<sup>10</sup>

In this work of Takáts it is possible to discover the type of closed world description that is so much characteristic of his poetry. The small town of *Polgárjelöltek* is a kind of anticipation for Drangalag; Drangalag and its imaginary world left a significant mark on the last two decades of the author's long life. E. M. Forster's observation proves to be relevant in connection with Takáts: “the patterns of some novels can be so clearly determined that the whole work can be summarised in them in the form of images.”<sup>11</sup>

Takáts is haunted by the same nihilism which urged Kosztolányi to write *Aranyárkány* [Golden Dragon]. The same pointlessness and empty vacuum, i.e. the ‘Nothing’ was threatening small town souls. In order to be able to fight these destructive spiritual swirls, you need human aims. Without aims – this is the lesson of Takáts's youth novels – all persistence and efforts are in vain. A sensible and good existence as an aim justifies one's dreams, even if a dream is merely a trout pond never seen before. Baron Zsigmond Kemény was very angry with country aristocrats who literally fooled around by teasing and tricking their servants, and were, thus, riding for a fall. A temporary and transitional social class still at the beginning of the long journey of becoming bourgeoisie. Peasants had moved to towns and have given up many things there; first, things from their daily routines then things from their culture. And, on the other hand, the tradesmen from towns still had not found the social role and the even more important identity with which it was possible to live and was worth living. During Hungary's sad history, neither between the two world wars nor in the period after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did they succeed in transforming into real townpeople from ‘townpeople-to-be’ in towns

<sup>10</sup> Wellek-Austin Warren, René: Az irodalom elmélete. [Theory of Literature] Osiris Kiadó, Bp. 2002. Hungarian translation: Szili József, 75. p. [Original citation in Hungarian, translated into English by the author of the dissertation]

<sup>11</sup> Forster, E. M. A regény aspektusai. [Aspects of the Novel] Helikon Kiadó. Bp. 1999. 111. p. Hungarian Translation: Szili József [Original citation in Hungarian, translated into English by the author of this dissertation]



apart from the capital. Takáts had seen only the first half of the century when he was writing the novel, but, just like Ady writing his poem *Fölszállott a páva* [A peacock takes its perch], he saw exactly the same sickness in his county. And he is even more bitter. Takáts's literary parabola has a more general message than being the mere social criticism of only one era. Yet, it is social criticism, without doubts. This is the country life in Hungary in 1925. The same locust trees give shade in the small Transdanubian town as the ones in Szabadka or anywhere in the former monarchy.

*Színház az „Ezüst Kancsó”-ban.* [Theatre in the 'Silver Jug'] The 'Silver Jug' in the title is the name of a small town hotel, in which there is a 'theatre'. Although the theatre building itself is opposite the hotel, the best actors and actresses of the theatre stay at the top floor of the Silver Jug. Several novels have been written about theatre in world literature and in Hungarian literature, too. Here is a list of some examples of authors and works not intended to be exhaustive: Bulgakov's *Black Snow: Theatrical Novel*, Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*, Maughams *Theatre*, Susan Sonntag's *In America*, Gyula Krúdy's *Utazások a vörös postakocsin* [The Crimson Post Coach], Gábor Thurzó's *A hal és háló* [The fish and the net], Iván Mándy's *Álom a színházról* [A Dream about Theatre], György Spiró's *Az ikszek* [The x-es] Iván Sándor's *Drága Liv* [Dear Liv]. Actors, entertainers and clowns have always been performers in literary works written about them. According to a widely held assumption among readers and audiences, actors are supposed to live a theatrical life whereas writers' lives are supposed to be full of romance. And all this is not without any foundation. In Takáts's novel a small town person knows about the life of an artist only as much as he might have read from books. In this chapter the dissertation will focus on Takáts's naming of characters. It reveals to what a large extent he knew the composition of the small town's, Nagyatád's (in the novel it is called Bakád) population, the mixing of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin.

*Kinek könnyebb?* [For Whom is it Easier?] If a writer, who writes novels, short stories and poems as well, was asked what a short story was, he would simply answer by pointing to the word; a short story was the one between the novel and the poem. There is no point in searching for more precise theoretical definitions, because, although there is relevant literature background in the field, it is not possible to find a more practical definition. A thin book was published in 1963, beautiful also by the cover, written by Gyula Takáts. After *Polgárjelöltek*, his readers had had to wait for almost two decades for being able to read Takáts's prose again. Concerning the small number of reviews of the book, it is likely that there have been influential contemporary criticisms disapproving of the fact the Takáts did



not aim to describe social changes, and ‘merely’ portrayed his world in ‘Egry József manners’.

His contemporaries ignored the fact that Takáts had elevated the world of the people living in the groves into Hungarian literature. Similarly to Illyés, Lajos Nagy and Móricz, who have written their ‘reports’ about the puszta and the sand with sociographic authenticity, Takáts is the best and most authentic expert of the grove shepherds.

*Egy kertre emlékezve* [Remembering a Garden]. Gyula Takáts, the essayist. In the history of the Hungarian literature there are a number of poets who were dealing with so many different things in addition to writing poetry, that it is almost incomprehensible how their lyric oeuvres were created. Balassi and Zrínyi were swordsmen, moreover, the former dealt with wine sales and the latter wrote military textbooks. Csokonai was interested in botany, Batsányi was involved in the transformation and reorganisation of the political and literary life, Berzsenyi farmed his estate, Petőfi created the revolution, Ady was an excellent journalist at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, it is astonishing how many pages of writings were born on these writers’ desks that are not their own poems but diaries, memoirs, minutely written essays, editorial scripts about other authors’ work, literary translation assignments to earn a living etc. Beyond knowing the prose writings of classic poet ancestors, Gyula Takáts was also familiar with those of his contemporaries. Let us read some of the letters written to him, and take a glimpse of poets’ and prose writers’ papers, essays and exhibition opening speeches. Let us think of Zoltán Jékely writing *A bárány vére* [The lamb’s blood], the outstanding essayist István Vas publishing his memoirs with the title *Nehéz szerelem* [Hard Love], or György Rónay, who is an excellent literary historian, too. Takáts’s generation was also followed by several groups of poets, whose work as literary historians and analysts added a great deal to their performance in poetry. György Rába’s monograph on Babits, as well as László Lator and Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s papers make a significant contribution to the study of Hungarian literature. Dezső Tandori’s reading diary *Az erősebb lét közelében* [Near stronger existence] is possible to be read as a confession. Even Gáspár Nagy’s two-volume prose collection *Szavak a rengetegből* [Words from the Forest] and *Közelebb az életemhez* [Closer to my Life] is more than some background to his poems; it is a significant and distinct work.

In most cases this is literary richness, because whatever the poet does with his raw material, i.e. the words, he makes a significant contribution. Takáts’s primary literary activity, writing poems is also affected by all this. There is no point in differentiating between a vine-grower Gyula Takáts and a poet Gyula Takáts. The Hungarian flora of the yellow soil in Becehegy has been elevated onto the white sheets of paper. The wood near the

vineyard has entered this world of poetry together with all its animals. Gyula Takáts could see the peacocks he had painted on his first drawings on Roman tombstones and in reality, as well. It is common knowledge that different genres are present in Takáts's oeuvre. In addition to his novels and short stories, his essays are also significant. He was already sixty years old when his prose collection *Egy kertre emlékezve* was published by Szépirodalmi Kiadó. The subtitle was *Művek és mesterek között* [Among works and authors]. There was the following author's commentary on the cover: „Könyvem címe jelképes, de ez a kert, az irodalom vagy a művészet kertje nekem valóság. Negyven éve művelem.” [The title of my book is symbolic, but for me, this garden, the garden of literature and art is reality. I have been cultivating it for forty years.]

The image of the garden is meant to remind the reader of his childhood eden and the eden of gaining consciousness. Humans lost paradise but got it back according to salvation history. It is possible to get the eden back by means of creating something.

## Research Results

By quantity, Gyula Takáts's prose writing is not comparable to his poetry at first sight. However, considering his so far only partly analysed letter writing, his yet unpublished diary and other notes, it would certainly be worth the comparison with his lyric oeuvre. There are still a lot of interesting discoveries to be made in his legacy, which will hopefully be analysed by professionals soon.

Gyula Takáts, as the last living writer of the Nyugat, preserved the values seen at the greatest figures of the Hungarian literature. Under a commonly held misconception of his poetry and all his writings he is often referred to as the author of the Hungarian serenity and cheerfulness. Such definitions are wrong because with their simplifications they distract attention from the elements in his prose that are possible to be considered as modern aspirations. One must discover the consciousness in Takáts's prose with which not only does he keep away from daily political and social events but also distances himself from the present at all times. His characters and topics are pointing beyond his age; he removes his characters from everyday life to place them into a world he created himself. In this way, closed communities are established such as suffocating small towns and sweltering groves, where characters are completely predictable. According to critics observing and analysing Takáts's poetry, one of the greatest values in his poems is his ceaseless attempt to create a self-sufficient separate world. The same conclusion can be drawn of his prose. In each work of his he describes a closed world in which the lesson beyond the story lies in

the peculiar relationships of the characters. Thus, these works are relevant even today. Where it was possible, the dissertation aimed to illustrate with examples the tools applied by his contemporaries, especially by other members of his literary generation. The little light shed on Takáts's prose so far concerned mainly his novels. The novel *Polgárjelöltek* can surely be considered as one of the significant works of the third Nyugat generation, however, in addition, I would have liked to draw attention the short story writer Takáts. During the analysis of the pieces in the collection *Kinek könnyebb?*, it was concluded that Takáts managed to leave the great masters' – Kosztolányi's, Krúdy's and Móricz's – influence behind by enriching their values with his own individual colours.

The answer to the question, whether Takáts's prose is merely a poet writing prose, is clearly no. These writings are valuable on their own. His poems add to his prose writings and this is true the other way round; his prose writings can be considered as a refinement of his lyric work. This is the gift from the light coming from several sides.

## **Epilogue**

The paper was written, and, to my greatest satisfaction, Gyula Takáts was able to read it and add some comments and refinements. The news was broken while the final draft was being written: he passed away at the age of 98, in the year when the *Nyugat* had been first published hundred years before. I had the honour to make the last interview with him right before his ninety-seventh birthday. In his memory, I am attaching it to this dissertation as an appendix, hoping that some of its parts will confirm the above.

Publications related to the topic of the dissertation:

### **Books:**

TAKÁTS, Gyula: Emlékek életrajza. Kaposvár, Berzsényi Könyvkiadó. 2001. ed.: Varga, István

TAKÁTS, Gyula: Öt esztendő Drangalagban [Five years in Drangalag]. Pécs, Pro Pannónia Kiadó, 2005. ed., notes, epilogue: Varga István

DRUZSIN, Ferenc: Angyaltenyérnyi kisváros. Kaposvár, [Kaposvár, a Small Town of an Angel's Palm] Berzsényi Könyvkiadó, 2005. ed.: Varga István

### **Essays, articles:**

1. Hűs vizek íze.[Taste of Cool Waters] In: Muratáj. 2002.1.
2. A Berzsényi Társaság története. [The History of the Berzsényi Association] In: Lélek...tesz csuda dolgokat Antology. Kaposvár, Berzsényi Könyvkiadó, 2004. ed.: Pomogáts Béla. 191-215 p.
3. A kilencvenöt éves Takáts Gyula győzelme. [The victory of the ninety-five-year-old Gyula Takáts. In: Somogyi Hírlap.04/02/2006. 10.p.
4. Iskola a szülőföldön. [School on native land] In: Somogy. 2006. 4-5.278 p.
5. A drangalagi költő. [The poet of Drangalag] In: Magyar Múzsza. 2008.1.9-16.p.
6. Költőnk a daliás időkben. [Our poet in glorious times] In: Somogy. 2008.1.17 p.
7. A teremő ember szép élete. [The beautiful life of a creative person] In: Somogyi Hírlap. 21/11/2008
8. Takáts Gyula „kilencvenes évei”. [Gyula Takáts's 'nineties'] In: Parnasszus, 2008. Winter. 42-44 p
9. Átsétált Drangalagba. [He walked to Drangalag] In: Somogy. 2008.4.cover.